

# Letter from Taizé

Preparing the council of youth

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## Letter from the Prior

One morning this autumn I received a letter with these words : « Sometimes I have left men to follow Christ, sometimes I have left Christ in favour of men, I had not understood that to save my life I had to leave myself. » Between leaving men to follow Christ, washing our hands of all the concerns of contemporary man, hoping in that way to be completely taken up in God, and leaving Christ for the sake of others, desiring to be totally involved in favour of man, there is a tension which tortures, drawing us apart, tearing us away from any inner unity.

Never Christ without man, never man without Christ ! Then, to be capable of upsetting all the determinisms that form the history of man, God offers us the possibility of standing in his presence — following Zacharias, Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary and so many others, the community of the poor of God. With them, we can accept to be given light from within and, in our turn, become givers of light.

Your brother Roger

## CELLS START UP

Needless to say, the creation of a cell is not a condition for taking part in the preparation of the council of youth. Many people already belong to a church movement, a union, a political party and for them that is the context of their «inner adventure». And others go forward alone :

*« I was struck by the question that people often asked this summer : "what can I do when I get back home ?" As though something more had at all costs to be added to their daily lives if they were to live the preparation of the council ! And I am brought back to the problem of interiorisation : that question was so often in terms of action... doing something... when for me it is rather a matter of living more intensely, with more reflection and attention, whatever everyday life brings, of fulfilling my commitments more deliberately. If the start is not a change in oneself, a deepening of that festival of the risen Christ, will we really advance on the long march ? Will we help those around us to advance ? »*

As the winter begins, there are cells starting up in many different places. There is more to live than to describe : the first stage being surely to bury down into

what men live? But we hope that the person in each cell who is in some sense its nucleus will write to us. Their experiences, reprinted in the *Letter from Taizé*, may give ideas, suggestions or answers to others who are still searching. The main elements in the life of a cell are the inner adventure and sharing in depth between members :

In France : « Arriving in a new town, I decided to live in a poor suburb. I am beginning to be accepted as I help backward children. I was very lucky to discover the cell that you told me of right from the beginning. We do not meet very often, each of us has his own activities. But the simple fact of knowing that the others exist, that you can always call on them and be sure of a welcome, is really very precious. That has given me a lot of freedom and inventiveness in my work and helped me adapt to my new surroundings. »

In Belgium : « Five of us have started a cell, ultra-varied (agnostic, atheist, christian ; doctor, student, economist) and since we are already involved in actions we simply want to get to know one another, deepen our relationships, go into the sense of life — and of our lives. We have just spent three days in a barn in the Ardennes sharing what each one has discovered after the stay in Taizé. Our aim is modest : to be truer to one another, and closer. We are all of us in search, as regards metaphysics, as regards action — for oneself and for others, whether they be close or distant — as regards our lives and our future. »

In Germany the six young members of a cell have undertaken six things : « To be faithful in prayer together and in reading the Bible ; communion, trust, love, openness and helpfulness amongst ourselves and towards others ; to collaborate faithfully with the parish ; to work for the unity of the Church ; to give a part of our income to



people in need ; to keep in touch with Taizé and to help in the preparation of the council of youth. Knowing our limits, we make this promise by writing. We do not want to enslave each other but to help persevere.» From time to time these young people intend to meet to provide this mutual support, spending three days together in the same house whilst continuing their work.

There are large numbers of young people who, as they embark on the inner adventure, sharing in a cell, are looking for the way in which they are going to put into practice their part in the preparation of the council. All sorts of attempts are being made : social work with immigrant workers, with cripples or with old people, action in political groups, in trade unions or in parishes, etc. :

« The first thing some of us did was to try to make contact with the "darbyist" communities in the region (non catholic christians, a church originating in the 19th century). We meet them at the weekend, first of all to share their life, to create bonds of friendship between us and to share our experiences of the christian faith. That is how I am preparing the council of youth — others do different things, everybody does as much as he can.»

We are often asked how something can be done in common with those who have never been to Taizé. From Italy we have received this introduction to a reply :

« We are a group of young Italians who passed through Taizé in September. When we got back home, we tried to let others share in what we had experienced, to let them come into the preparation of the council. The youth group we have rejoined has already been in existence for two years and there has been the problem of how to reconcile the new vitality discovered at Taizé with the demands of the other members of the group. We have

found it hard to avoid these two extremes : either, forget what has been discovered and return to where we were before, or show so much enthusiasm that Taizé becomes a myth and our friends are shocked by our euphoria. Some have suggested that we meet from time to time, so that the experience of Taizé does not fade slowly ; others insist that that kind of meeting would isolate us from the rest of the group and that it is better to live the spirit of the preparation of the council simply, within what already exists. »

The question of what can be done to help resolve the enormous problem of immigrant workers in Europe has become the main preoccupation of many cells. But the appeal launched last June to build houses with the immigrant families, on the advice of Dom Helder Camara, has found few echoes. Perhaps it went beyond what is possible for most young people. We have also been warned of the risk of competing with organisations which already exist.

The energy taken up in working in isolation can be better used elsewhere — in the end the best thing is to leave this work to the competent specialist organisations. At Taizé we have a list of international and regional organisations for those who are looking for work in this direction. For some even the work of these organisations is a problem, as one person has written :

« The aim is to offer a "decent life" to immigrants — to give material help and to integrate them into the life of the country. This integration becomes, in fact, an identification with Europeans — to make of the foreigner a perfect Frenchman, German, Belgian... Perhaps the council of youth is called to propose an integration that is not an absorption. For instance when you try to teach an Algerian French, you see that he has a different set of values. The tendency often is to replace his way of thinking with ours. »

## NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

*« When I was there, you talked about the future council of youth, but without fixing a date. I gather that it is now fixed : 1975. »*

*« I should like to take part in the council of youth announced for 1972 and should be grateful for further details. »*

Thus two anticipatory letters ! In actual fact the prior of Taizé, in announcing the council of youth, has never fixed a date for its opening. On the contrary, he has often said, « we advance by stages of a year, from Easter to Easter. At Easter 1971, with a new inter-continental team, we shall prepare the next stage. When we have all sufficiently listened to what comes from the southern hemisphere, and when we have announced it in every country, when we have lived the inner adventure within ourselves and gone deeply into what the joyful news means, then will come the moment when the council of youth can open — its date will be announced beforehand. »

The attempt to let the southern hemisphere speak cannot be made in just one year. A beginning has been made : Margarita Moyano, in charge of the preparation of the council of youth, returned to Buenos Aires by way of Mexico, Venezuela, Columbia, Peru and Chili :

*« ... At Mexico and Caracas I met several groups of young people. I had been afraid that there would be problems about the joyful news and the announcement of the council of youth — difficulties of language and of formulation. I wondered whether it would appeal to them enough... Well, it appeals to them very much indeed ! At Caracas there was a young composer of revolutionary songs who said : "that's a whole programme of life, it means involving everything you are". A girl added : "I*



reckon the council is something you live, before it's a meeting".

» I can feel that the idea catches on and, more than that, is the answer to a hope...

» I was struck to see the unanimous welcome given to the joyful news. They really understand the full dimensions of what is announced — one described it as "demanding, and then, full of hope as well". I was constantly being told that what struck many was the paschal dimension — particularly urgent in the context of the struggle for liberation in Latin America : the discovery of a dimension of joy and hope at the very heart of the struggle for justice. The phrase of Maximinio "struggle with a reconciled heart" was the subject of splendid conversations with certain strongly politicised and involved members of the groups. One of them said : "A springtime of the Church? You always think in terms of flowers... now I see that it is a matter of renunciation and service."

» I deliberately separated the joyful news and the council, on the one hand so that the council did not seem to be the news — it is only an instrument — on the other so as to measure the reactions to each of the two announcements. The surprising thing is that the council interests, no doubt about that, but it is the joyful news that finds an echo going far beyond what might have been expected.

» Now we shall have to find ways of encouraging the work of those who want to join in the preparation of the council this far away.»



In Bombay there are a number of young Indian christians setting up the listening place. With them there is Moiz Rasiwala — a member of the intercontinental team that prepared the joyful news at Taizé before Easter. This is what he says of himself :

« I am from India. I am not a christian. When I look at the world, I see men and nations greedy for power. Yet 2000 years ago a man lived on the earth. He sought no power. He united men in a single, universal body. What have we done, what have you done, Westerners claiming to be christians, with that seed that unites us? The Church, being love, is capable of being the last place on earth where the visible unity of men can be realised. I think that the other ideas of unity that we find in the world are dogmatic ideas : they can never be a meeting point for all humanity. It is in that way that I consider the Church to be the only place of unity.»

Here are some extracts from recent letters from Moiz :

« ... some of us have met to discuss the joyful news for the first time. What we contribute to the council is bound to be typically Indian -- dominated by our preoccupations and by the social situation in the country. At the moment, the crying need is for a relief of the misery of the masses. Young christians, inspired by the joyful news, could become the driving force for a national reconciliation in favour of developement...

» ... I have written several articles about the council of youth for various newspapers — one a nation-wide magazine.

» I remain shaken by the contact here with a hard social reality, the raging materialistic attitudes, the petty political games, the search for power and the use made of it. I am sure that our Indian spirituality is still there, but where? I have just been to the North of the country, to Delhi and in the Rajastan. Crossing the Rajastan, I saw scenes of senseless cruelty. A girl of 10 was crying beside a soldier of 25. He had just married her and was carrying her off to his village. Another time the bus stopped in a melon field. The driver took a lot from the little boy who was selling them, then walked away without paying, he



was laughing. Afterwards some of the melons got eaten, the rest were thrown out of the window.

»India has always thirsted for God, it still does. I know that Christ is there, in India. But Christ weeping, suffering, looking for deliverance, because we ever crucify him. We have nothing to offer the youth of the West except pain, distress and perhaps confusion as well. But I am looking, all the time I am looking...

»... I have been able to make solid contacts for the council in the South — at Madras, Bangalore and Mangalore as well as at Bombay...»

## A MONTH IN ITALY AND JUGOSLAVIA

To prepare the council of youth it is essential to be attentive to the Southern hemisphere, because men are poorest there; in the same spirit the first journey in Europe has been southwards — to the far South of Italy. A temporary cell, Gianni (Italy), Emilio (Spain) and Rémy (France), met in Taizé and then spent the whole of October travelling through Italy, visiting a large number of groups preparing the council of youth. Their main goals were visits to Calabria and Sicily — they also went as far as Jugoslavia.

For this journey there were several aims in view. Nothing can replace visits as a way of keeping in touch between cells and of giving mutual support. They also provide the possibility of meeting young people who might otherwise not have heard of the council. But the main aim was to listen to those who have no means of expressing themselves in the South, to understand their situation a little better and to look for ways — obviously limited — in which young people might be able to contribute to the life of the Church and to greater justice in this region.

« ... everywhere there were lively, spontaneous meetings, the welcome was fraternal and friendly. We had chosen the ideal moment : the harvest was finished and the peasants were free to receive us and talk. Day by day, listening and talking, we collect intuitions and by seeing how they live we understand better what they are searching for as well as the various tensions they are exposed to.

» We are plunged into the reality of the South, and it is hard to separate misery, beauty, faith, desolation, tragedy and simplicity. Such misery is tragic — it is as though only the crucifixion has ever been announced here. These are regions where there can be no doubt as to the value of a effort of conscientisation, the whole population waking up to what it can do. Talking becomes impossible and there is nothing to do but pray. It is sure that a cell, were one to be created to stay here for a while, would have to live the most hidden of the hidden movements of the Church, the discretion of a constant faith, because the poor here are pure contemplatives, without realising it. Here we are always repeating the joyful news and praying with it — in this context it is really a challenge of hope !

» ... The archbishop we have just met was very glad of all that we told him of the long march and of the hidden movement — "at the moment, he said, I am living that same search in my diocese".

» ... These days there are not many meetings organised, we spend them with the villagers — young people and children — talking ; we pray in the churches when it is time for the Offices. Unexpected things mean that we are all the time discovering something new... In Sicily the few who have been to Taizé have made so much noise that our little cell had to break up in certain places to satisfy all the invitations. At Palermo we met a large number of those responsible for catholic youth movements...

» *In southern Italy the life of the peasants, who work in the vegetable fields, is strongly marked by injustice. Wages are low and wealth is in the hands of a very few. At Messina we paid particular attention when some young people talked of conscientisation — there is no doubt that it is the most urgent thing to be done if men are to cease being victims of their own situation. Here we realise how fragile the festival is and we pray the risen Christ for imagination and courage. In the riots yesterday evening one person was killed and three were wounded...*

» ... *In Yugoslavia we met priests working with young people, and students. It will need another journey to visit more towns and to follow up these contacts. We were told, "come again; we already live the preparation for the council because here being a christian is no privilege..." »*

## **THE RISEN CHRIST COMES TO QUICKEN A FESTIVAL...**

We tried to indicate in the third *Letter* the very broad outlines, the framework, on which this year's reflection on the festival was based. All through the meetings this summer there were four questions asked, to give everyone the chance to say what a festival was for him, in what circumstances he lived it, how he shared it with others and how it can be made possible for all.

The thousands of individual replies reveal an enormous variety of attitudes and experiences which are often very close, sometimes contradictory. Every life is unique and each one of us reacts differently to joy and suffering, has his own way of looking at things. We have chosen a few replies simply to provoke reactions and reflections.



They may help to find ways of introducing the festival of the risen Christ into life. These replies are introduced by a few sentences from what Margarita Moyano said to introduce the questions during the summer.

1st question : Recently what experience of festival have I lived What does festival evoke in me ?

*« ... We are not talking about the superficial, deafening, noisy kind of festival, but something deeper, which seizes the whole of ones being. What does festival mean for me ? »*

*» There are thousands of answers possible. When we asked in the intercontinental team that prepared the joyful news before Easter what the festival was for each of us, Ann the black American said : "For me, I am the festival ! Everything I am vibrates, sings and dances, I love with everything I am." Then Maximinio, the worker from North East Brazil, said : "For me it is the struggle to make others free." Coming from him those were no vain words, he knows the cost of freedom.*

*» Festival and effort, festival and suffering ... are the two compatible ? Think about your own experiences of life... »*

#### *Festival — celebration of life*

*« Festival is becoming aware of my life and that of others. »*

*« It is inner peace, serenity, joy, a strength coming from within. »*

*« For me festival has to be expressed, become visible by singing, dancing, physical gestures. »*

*A young African said : « Festival is like holding a fruit. You have the impression that it is going to be good. You taste it — it is good. The more you eat, the more you like it. When it is finished, you want another. »*

*« To be in a state of festival you have to be capable of astonishment and wonder, of understanding the hidden sense of small things. It is the discovery in someone else of what he really, marvellously is : an image of the risen Christ. »*

« I can easily imagine a festival in solitude. For instance, when I try to rediscover the beauty of nature : if I succeed, I am so delighted that for me it's a real festival. »

### *Festival : struggle*

« I find festival in a struggle — a political commitment in the service of man. »

« Festival is what results when man fights against everything that is ugly and unjust. »

« In a children's camp : a problem child, in revolt, who says at the end of his stay to the person looking after him : "I had not been loved like that for a long time." To feel that by all your efforts you have given that child something, a little happiness, is a real festival. »

« When workers speak up at a union meeting, knowing that the employers are listening and will take action against them. »

« Festival is the discovery of a state of collective responsibility that allows you to advance and to overcome problems. It needs personal and collective conversion and the conversion of social structures. »

### *Festival : communion*

« For me Christ is the festival. I cannot do without him now. »

« By faith I spent a moment of festival with my family. My mother was ill with a cancer, we prepared for her to die. All the family was together to live the event with God. Now that my mother is dead, the festival carries on. We are still true to what we lived. »

« For me prayer is a festival because there I welcome someone who is greater than I am. »

« Festival of forgiveness, God's mercy : admitting my faults in confession so as to be fully myself, freed from the burdens that drag me down. After confession I feel ready to bear witness to the festival. »

« Arriving at festival is like arriving at the resurrection after passing through a series of obstacles seen as so many little deaths. »

« Some people ask : Have I the right to live a festival ? " Isn't it ironical to talk of festival surrounded as we are by so much suffering and misery, so many things wrong both in us and around us ? The question is, rather : Have I the right not to live it ? Not if I believe in the resurrection. But the resurrection can only be lived where there is first the Passion. »

## 2nd question : What prevents, hinders or limits festival in us and around us ?

« ... Our technical civilisation cuts down the number of festival days because they limit productivity and yield. And they are no longer "festival days", "holy-days" but "days off". Yet in the Third World festivals determine the structure of social life.

» In the mind of rich countries "time is money". I suspect that we must try to recover the sense of the gratuitous — the exact opposite of "productivity-at-all-costs". So what is it in our lives that prevents festival — as an inner celebration and as a social celebration? It is said that certain people are loosing the sense of festival : we have to re-invent festival in what we live, not look regretfully into the past. »

*The obstacles are within each one of us*

« A festival is refused when I won't take the time necessary to listen to someone. »

« Ridiculous dreams are an obstacle to festival, so is refusing to stay in the present. »

« Being afraid : afraid of doing something, afraid of changing my habits, afraid of dying. »

« The lack of inner unity : the contradiction between what I think, what I say and what I do. The lack of continuity : dodging between yesterday and tomorrow. The lack of peace : not enough confidence in Christ and the changes he can always operate in my life. »

« Having our attention fixed too high stops us seeing simply the joys that are there : we are indifferent, want something better, we don't know how to make do with what we've got. »

« What prevents festival is the desire to possess men — judging them instead of accepting them. It is the desire for power and refusing to accept mystery. »

« In any festival there always comes a moment of discouragement that gives the impression of being a limit. But then you realise, not just intellectually but deep in your heart, that that festival touches eternity, is simply a tiny part of the festival of eternal life. »



*There are obstacles that are found in others*

« I am incapable of festival because of all the unhappiness in the world. »

« In my region a group of young people meet regularly to tackle social and political problems ; they come from a small village. A personality of some importance frowns on these meetings — he is afraid that the group might become too important and end by being a threat to his power. Soon the adults in the village come to be of his opinion. This suspicion spoils the atmosphere in the group, which ends by not daring to do anything for fear of provoking reactions and the final result is complete paralysis. »

*A Brazilian* : « Have I got the right to be happy ? In my country misery and riches go side by side. I have seen a man die of starvation on the street. »

« Face to face with misery, I am ashamed of my good fortune. As for the most unfortunate, should I become like them or try to help them to be like me ? »

*In society there are things that get in the way of festival*

« Society often strikes us as being superficial, artificial or individualistic ; it makes us think that happiness is easy : things and money. »

« Our time-table leaves no place for festival ; we need to be more flexible to seize opportunities. What need to be changed are not so much structures as social attitudes : encourage, for instance, human relationships in places of work. We have become passers-by. We need to learn how to waste time — if our work and industrial civilisation will only allow us the possibility. »

« Oppressive structures prevent us from expressing our ideas. For example, May '68 allowed free expression — the formation of innumerable small groups of different kinds, it was a festival, total communication. Then society more or less imposed its ideas by its leaders — hindering free expression. »

« The energy taken up in making war could be better used for liberating acts. If all destructive acts could become liberating acts — the arms race ; the sale of arms to countries like South Africa or Biafra. »

« A festival is the expression of a community. The old communities, like the family, the parish or the village, are breaking up and with them disappear the festivals by which they expressed themselves. We have to create other communities — they too will find a festival as their spontaneous means of expression. »

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IN THE NEXT LETTER :  
REPLIES TO QUESTIONS 3 and 4.

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The Joyful News announced at Easter 1970 :

*The Risen Christ comes to quicken a festival in the innermost heart of man. He is preparing a spring time of the Church : a Church devoid of means of power, ready to share with all, a place of visible communion for all humanity. He is going to give us enough imagination and courage to open up a path of reconciliation. He is going to prepare us to give our life so that man be no longer victim of man.*